

New Freedom for the 21st Century

On July 4, 1776, representatives from the thirteen original colonies adopted the Declaration of Independence. In the first paragraph of that document, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The founding fathers of this country remembered long ago what many seem to have forgotten since. All Americans have the same rights, even those who happen to have disabilities.

When the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed in 1990, many people called it a civil rights act for people with disabilities. At the time, about two-thirds of the forty-two million people with disabilities who wanted to work were either unemployed or underemployed. They earned less money, had less education, and had access to fewer everyday activities than people who did not have disabilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act was supposed to change all of that, but it did not.

Now, in the twenty-first century, there are more people than ever living with disabilities. Fifty-four million Americans have disabilities that affect their major life activities such as walking, talking, speaking, seeing, hearing, and working. And still, there are two-thirds of those people who want to work but are unemployed or underemployed. They still earn less money, have less education, and have access to fewer everyday activities than people who do not have disabilities. They do not vote as often and they have less access to computers and the Internet. They do not own homes at the same rate as people who do not have disabilities.

In February of 2001, President Bush signed the New Freedom Initiative for the benefit of people who have disabilities. Recognizing that people with disabilities have not been treated

equally, he has made an effort to provide the freedom all Americans enjoy to people with disabilities. With the New Freedom Initiative, people with disabilities will be offered greater access to educational opportunities. They will be given better access to technology and a better chance to become a home owner.

It should not take a law or a program backed by the President of the United States to give equal rights and opportunities for people with disabilities. History is full of examples of people with disabilities who have contributed greatly to society. Every American with a disability will not be like the speaker, author, and diplomat Helen Keller, who was also both blind and deaf. But, every American deserves the chance to succeed.

Every American with a disability will not be a leader and president like Franklin Roosevelt who was also paralyzed by polio. But, every American deserves the chance to contribute. Every American with a disability will not be a great inventor like Thomas Edison who also struggled with learning disabilities. But, every American deserves the opportunity to work and become whatever he or she dreams.

New Freedom for the 21st Century needs to be more than a slogan. Americans with disabilities are simply Americans. The disability does not make them greater or less than any other American. It is only when people who have disabilities are able to enjoy equal access to every opportunity that freedom will exist for them. A law exists to insure that people who have disabilities cannot be discriminated against. It is up to every American to also uphold the spirit of that law. That is the only way that freedom for people with disabilities will be a reality in the twenty-first century.